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ABSTRACT

In an interview at a Speech Communication Association conference in 1975, Walter Cronkite of CBS news was asked a number of questions on the role and characteristics of television news. Among the items discussed with Mr. Cronkite were the following: the degree to which events are shaped by their being reported on national news programs; the news media as a free-enterprise open market; television coverage of the International Women's Year conference; the process of deciding what will be included in an evening's broadcast; the perception of Mr. Cronkite in national polls as an optimally credible individual; interviews (including Cronkite's impressions of people he has interviewed) the Lyndon Johnson interviews, and Cronkite's position on the practice of paying individuals for interviews ("checkbook interviewing"); the use of women as anchor-persons; ratings; network pressure on news production; the first amendment in broadcasting, especially with reference to the fairness doctrine and other FCC regulations; personal preparation for interviews; Watergate and the media; the 1976 election; the burden of responsibility placed on television news by its being most people's primary source of news information; personal bias and subjectivity in reporting; provision of free time to political candidates; and television coverage of the Vietnam war. (DF)

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An Evening with Walter Cronkite

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1975 Speech Communication Association Summer Conference on MASS COMMUNICATION IN EDUCATION AND SOCIETY, July 10-12, 1975, Austin, Texas

CS 502 183

An Evening with Walter Cronkite

Walter Cronkite of CBS News was the featured speaker in the MASSCOMM program. Mr. Cronkite spoke informally, in a question and answer session, on Friday, July 11, 1975.

Dr. Davis: Many of you have had an opportunity to talk with Mr. Cronkite on the riverboat trip up here from Austin. We'll continue that conversation now. Mr. Cronkite has agreed to answer your questions and that will be our format for the next hour or so. Let me begin. Mr. Cronkite, you have been referred to any number of times as one of the most credible people in this country. Others, however, less charitably perhaps, have described national news reporters as the makers and shapers of history, as causing the public to perceive events in a given and certain light. How do you respond to this sort of charge? How much shaping does the journalist give to the events covered and reported on the national news programs?

Mr. Cronkite: Well, I suppose the answer to that is that the journalist gives quite a bit of shaping to the events as they are reported in that he has to be selective in what is reported. He can't tell all of every story, and that obviously gives a story shape, form, direction, if you please. I do not think, however, that we deliberately give shape and form to a story in an effort to move people in one direction or another -- in other words, to exert influence by shaping a story. I would deny that anyone in the national media -- national television or the major newspapers -- tries to do that. It doesn't work that way. You wouldn't get by with it very long if it did, which is another thing people don't seem to understand who would criticize broadcasters particularly for trying to inject bias and prejudice. You would have to assume that everybody in a network broadcast newsroom was like-minded, in the first place, which is not true, despite what Spiro Agnew used to think. And you would have to assume that everybody in management is like-minded. You would have to assume that no one in the newsroom, absolutely no one, including the lowest employee, had any scruples about the use of power, as such, because we all broadcast about as much for our colleagues as we do for the public. We want their appreciation, their plaudits, and we wouldn't get them if we were distorting the news deliberately.

Dr. Davis: It's also been suggested that there is enough competition among media that to distort would be most difficult. There is also great faith placed in the public by persons such as Charles Guggenheim, who spoke earlier in this conference and argued that in the end the public does have very good sense given an opportunity to assess.

Mr. Cronkite: And it is given an opportunity to assess under our free enterprise system, if I may say so, with the free press and free broadcasting. They are given a multiplicity of channels to watch and of newspapers and opinion journals and books to buy, so it would be very hard for anyone to try to monopolize that flow of information.

Dr. Davis: Let's open this up to other persons. What questions do you in the audience have?

Question: Will you discuss the TV coverage of the Women's Conference in Mexico City?

Mr. Cronkite: Well, discuss it, yes. There wasn't probably enough of it I would say, but on the other hand there might have been about as much as it was worth in view of the other developments that were going on in the world at the time. This matter of having to make the decisions on a national network broadcast of what we put in 24 minutes doesn't leave a lot of leeway to cover anything in very great depth. I would like to have seen some special broadcasts on the conference in Mexico City. I think it did deserve that and should have had it and there weren't any that I know of. There may have been a special or two, but I wasn't aware of them. We had two full crews down there to cover the events. We tried to do so. I must say that we got into difficulty in covering it again because of this matter of news judgment. There were those who criticized the fact that we covered the counter conference instead of the conference itself and then some from the counter conference who believe we spent all our time with the conference and didn't cover the counter conference. So you can't win. We're in very much of a no-win position in satisfying special interest groups or even broad groups on specific coverage of specific events that run over a long period of time. We do not have the time to do it on the evening news. Incidentally, I'd like to lay down a little ground rule here for interpretation of what I say. I've put myself so poorly many times that interpretation is necessary, so let's put the ground rules out first. Unless specifically referred to otherwise I'll be speaking of broadcast network evening news when I talk about news and network broadcasting. That is my responsibility, not documentaries. I'll be glad to talk about documentaries but I look at it about as you do, more from the outside than the inside.

Question: A number of public opinion polls, including informal polls of my own classes, have suggested that you probably have as much or more credibility as an individual than anyone in the entire country. From your own personal viewpoint what do you think it is about yourself that gives you that kind of credibility to so many Americans?

Mr. Cronkite: Oh shucks, I thought you were going to ask me to run. I have to acknowledge that polls do show that, and I admit that it's something of a mystery. I will also confess that I have been asked the question before and therefore have been forced to give it some thought. It's nothing that sent me home, the first time I read Roper's survey, staying awake nights worrying about it. It's very unfortunate to have to discuss it at all because it sounds obviously self-serving. I think the answer would be in the fact that I am deeply interested in what I am doing in the attempt to communicate, in the attempt to understand the news itself and then to get it out to the public in a form which they can understand. I'm really quite devoted to that task and

devoted to trying to make it as fair and objective as possible knowing full well my own as well as other men's limitations in being unbiased and unprejudiced, but trying to recognize those prejudices where I have them and be sure that I take that factor into account and give it a proper weight when judging the news. I believe that has to be the answer, simply dedication, and also, in all honesty, longevity. I've been there so darned long. I've got now this kind of avuncular status. Good old Uncle Walt's out there telling you the news. I haven't been caught in too many lies. I've made a lot of mistakes, but I think it's just probably that kind of a rash.

Comment: Sir, just a comment, I've heard an ABC vice-president refer to you not as Uncle Walt but as old ironpants. Because of your longevity of course.

Mr. Cronkite: Well that also applies I think to a lot of long broadcasts we've done where I've spent a long time at that desk. If anybody's wondering about that other question, about being on the air seventeen hours, thank goodness for the commercials.

Question: I'd like to know, out of all the people that you've interviewed in depth, who you were most impressed by and why?

Mr. Cronkite: Well, that's a very difficult question. I'm easily impressed, in the sense that I'm kind of like Will Rogers, you know, never met the man I didn't like, which is really true. People have to do a lot of ugly things directly to me before I decide that I don't like them. Who most impressed me? I could jump in with a couple of people who aren't the people you'd expect. For instance, Lord Richie Calder. A guy named Applestan Spielhaus. I don't know whether it's because of his name or the man himself, but he's one of my very favorite people. Both of them are futurists and renaissance men and fascinating people for that reason. I think just as conversationalists they are the most fascinating people I know. I think perhaps, of world leaders, one of the most impressive is Tito. I was very impressed with Tito. For strength of personality, Lyndon Johnson has to be up among the top. For surprises, Dwight Eisenhower. The surprise being that he was so knowledgeable about so many of the small elements of his administration, as well as the large, that I thought he had left to staff work and didn't know about at all while he was president. I interviewed him after he was President and I was surprised at the depth of his knowledge. I think those would have to be my immediate nominees.

Question: I have a question with regard to an article I read several years ago about your conversations with Lyndon Johnson. Today a panel discussed redirects where you asked a question in a personal interview and then Johnson left and then you rephrased the question perhaps with a different inflection of voice. And Dan Rather was used as an illustration today. I was wondering how you felt about this? Did you ever have any discussion with Lyndon Johnson or these others about redirected questions after they were no longer in the room?

Mr. Cronkite: Former President Johnson raised the question after one of our broadcasts. He was never one to defer in a case of that kind. He raised the question and felt that I had, by my expression, not by changing the wording of the questions, which we did not do, that was never done. We did ask the questions again in order to facilitate editing. The only way we could get a picture of the interviewer was to wait until the interview was over, then reverse the camera and do what we call reverses, as you know. But we did not attempt and never did change the wording of the question in any way. What President Johnson thought I had done was cock a skeptical eye on his answers. I did not, I mean not deliberately. It would have been rather surprising if I had because one is sitting there trying to simply get the question out. He's gone from the room you understand, he's not there. The camera's now where his chair had been, and you're simply trying to get those questions out. You don't even know what the answer to the previous question is going to have been when it gets to the editing so you can't deliberately look skeptical. But he felt we did. And as a matter of fact, because he did, and raised the point, it brought this to our attention. It should have come to our attention before. After all, we'd been in the business fifteen years or something by that time. It did call it to our attention and it (redirected questions) has been banned ever since at CBS. It's not elsewhere, I must say. Reverses are still done elsewhere, but at CBS news we do not do reverses. Now in case of a formal interview like with President Johnson, we do it with enough cameras, and the cameras so placed, that you can get a view of the interviewer as well. It won't be the direct eye contact view that you would have if you put the camera in the seat of the interviewee. It's not quite as good therefore, actually. Pictorially, it's not as good a picture, but it's more honest and there's no chance of anybody raising that question.

Question: What's your response to checkbook interviews, the flap in CBS recent work?

Mr. Cronkite: I am absolutely opposed to checkbook interviews when they are of currently newsworthy people. That is, they're likely to produce first-page news. In that case, I'm absolutely opposed to it. On the other hand, I do believe that television should pay for memoirs, just as a newspaper or a magazine or a book publisher would pay for them. That's capital invested in the case of the individual and I think they're entitled to be paid for it.

Question: There is speculation that ABC is looking for a woman to be co-anchor woman for the fall in an attempt to improve their rating. What chance is there that the networks are going to go the same way the local newscasts have gone with the happy talk format, the top-40 newscasts?

Mr. Cronkite: Well, I would certainly hope that that's not going to happen on the network side and I have a kind of a reasonable confidence that it's not going to. I wouldn't guarantee that it won't someday if

the rating battle gets that severe, but the rating battle has been severe for 20 years and nobody's gone that route on the networks yet. One network did begin to slip into that three or four years ago with kind of the old fashioned newsreel, a bathing beauty feature every night, a little dipping into the sensational. It didn't last very long and it didn't do anything for their ratings and they didn't stick with it, I'm happy to say. I don't think that adding a woman as an anchor person would necessarily indicate that they were going to go toward that route. I don't think that would mean that at all. As a matter of fact, some of the best broadcasters and most serious broadcasters are in the ranks of the women broadcasters. I would hope that they would select one of those people and not a bathing beauty to do the news, or a hollywood type. You know, I do feel, really, that it's unfortunate that the network's been so seriously maligned in the last few years, of course for obvious reasons, for the purpose of trying to bring them under control, trying to bring public pressure to somehow or other dissipate this intense power that indeed network news broadcasts have, that networks have. It has colored very badly the public opinion of the network news organizations, whereas actually I can say this certainly of CBS, and I believe it to be true at NBC and ABC, although I can't testify in personal knowledge, my years have all been spent at CBS -- I know that this is the freest form of news dissemination that there is in this country and therefore in the world. As far as the newsmen themselves being in control of the broadcast, I have never once in thirteen years on the CBS evening news, I have never once been given a directive on what to say on the air, how to say anthing on the air, what not to say on the air, from any official at CBS or, quite obviously, I don't think I need to even mention that, that canard is so long dead in its grave, from advertisers. It just does not exist, that sort of pressure. And I can't say that for any newspaper I ever worked for, for any press service I ever worked for, for any other organization. And I don't believe it exists on any magazine or anywhere else as it does in broadcasting.

Question: I'm personally grateful for your stand on behalf of that kind of freedom. Where would you assess our current place in that first amendment heritage that we have in relationship to broadcasting?

Mr. Cronkite: Well, in relation to broadcasting, I don't know whether you all heard that. (Airplane noise) If this had been the last administration I would think that was deliberate. The question was where do we stand today in the matter of maintaining our freedoms in broadcast news? We don't stand very well, frankly. Because of the federal communications regulations and the fact that broadcasting is under government control. Now, the FCC has been absolutely marvelous, including right through the Nixon administration, has been marvelous in keeping hands off direct intervention in network news broadcasting, and in local news broadcasting. Despite the fairness doctrine and equal time and other regulations that would permit

limitation, I think, they've been very, very good about it. But, the fact remains that that sword hangs over the head of every broadcaster. And as we saw in the Nixon administration, and could quite well be repeated again some other day and made more effective, there is a chilling effect of the threat to use FCC regulations to bring down a broadcaster or a broadcast station. Now this is not so likely to be an effective threat in the case of the networks, but it certainly can be and I think has been a threat on a local station level. The local station simply cannot afford to fight through an FCC action. The FCC begins to move against it, threatening its license. Merely looking at it cross-eyed can put a local station into quavering fear because it simply can't afford to fight through an action. The FCC begins to move against it, threatening its license. Merely looking at it cross-eyed can put a local station into quavering fear because it simply can't afford the long license fight. And as long as that situation exists I think we're going to not have a totally free broadcast medium. I would strongly support the Proxmire bill against the fairness doctrine, eliminating the fairness doctrine, and I would go much further than that. I would eliminate all FCC control over all broadcasters except for the monitoring of their remaining on their proper wave length. And I'd leave it right at that. I think we would lose an awful lot of news broadcasting, public affairs broadcasting, and a lot of markets where rapacious owners would simply drop anything of that nature and go strictly for the top 40 rock and roll. But, on the other hand, I think you'd find a lot better news stations also growing up and you'd know that they were free and independent.

Question: In the case of your interviews, or the space shots, what kind of personal preparation do you do prior to those as far as gathering material and forming questions in your own mind?

Mr. Cronkite: Well, this is the thing in which I think that I do best, quite honestly, and I'm proudest of and that didn't happen during those three years at The University of Texas. I did my homework. I might not have learned to study earlier but I did learn it really basically with the space shot. For a fellow who came to The University of Texas with some thought that he might be a mining engineer and gave that up -- you know, that's kind of natural for me, too. Here I am in Texas with all this oil, I was going to be a mining engineer -- I gave up that idea in the first year of physics from Dr. Bone. I don't know whether you remember Dr. Bone or not. We had a Dr. Bone here. He was a physics teacher, a physics professor. I couldn't figure out how a pulley worked. When I couldn't figure out the formula for a pulley or why it worked I decided I didn't want to go down in a mine. That was one of the smarter things I did at The University. Probably the only smart thing I did. But when I started explaining celestial physics, orbital physics, over the air to 20 or 30 million people, Dr. Bone, I think now referred to as the whirling Dr. Bone out at the graveyard. Actually that taught me to study, if nothing else had. I think I'd probably

learned before then but I really had to pore over the books and get just an awful lot of private tutoring to understand that, but I do that for everything that I do now. For an interview, I prepare for days for an interview. I read everything I can get on the individual and other people's opinions of the individual. For a space shot I spend a lot of time in direct research with the people involved, with the planners and the builders. For a convention, very much the same thing. And I find that I don't have a great memory for these things. I have to go back and do it all over again every four years for conventions, for instance. I don't remember all of the details of previous conventions and I have to review. I also am a learner by doing. I don't learn just by reading. I pour through all the research material and literally write a book to myself. I classify and reclassify and double-categorize everything I can think of for the coming event. And have that book handy and available for quick reference. But I find that by studying that way it's all pretty much in my head for the duration of the time I need it. Then it's gone. I go back to the book four years later and find I've abbreviated so many things I can't even remember what I wrote then.

Question: Mr. Cronkite, for a seasoned news hand like yourself, were there any surprises for you in the saga of Watergate?

Mr. Cronkite: I think the whole thing was a surprise from the beginning. Yes, there were surprises right on through. Every one of those developments that made news, made news partly because it was a surprise, of course. Maybe the initial event wasn't as much a surprise as it might have been. That is, the fact that there had been a break in and bugging at the Democratic headquarters. I doubt that that was an entirely isolated episode in the history of political parties in this country. But of course the events that then transpired, the cover-up and the people who were involved in the cover-up, and the heights in the Republican Party that had been involved in the original episode and then the cover-up. The whole thing was a surprise.

Question: Mr. Cronkite, would you care to make a comment or two about the prospects of the current contenders for the next general election at the Presidential level?

Mr. Cronkite: Well, I think you ought to know something about my crystal ball. I came back from Moscow after two years there as the chief correspondent for the United Press. Now that's the kind of thing you put in a bio, see -- Chief Correspondent United Press. You don't go on to the next sentence, "He was the only one there." I was there two years. I came back in late '48 and went on the mandatory lecture tour; never had made a speech and never stood in front of an audience in my life except the Curtain Club, and that was a disaster. I went on that entire lecture tour over a period of about three months. We had question/answer period afterwards and I knew that the first question people would ask, and it turned out to be on almost every occasion, was, "Is Russia going to get an atomic bomb?" That was on everybody's mind at that particular time. I want to tell you that across the United States I told all those audiences "Never! These people can't make a toilet work.

They're never going to get an atomic bomb." And they exploded one midway in my lecture tour. I also picked Dewey in '48. But I think it's far too early. I'm not ducking the question because there just isn't any answer to it at this point. It's far too early. So many things can happen. In the volitility of American politics as we've seen over the last several Presidential campaigns unfortunately mortality even is a question. It's just far too early to make a judgment as to how this field of Democratic candidates is going to shake out. Until we start seeing them make the early run in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, I don't think we're going to get much of an idea.

Question: You've answered this in part, and we certainly appreciate your statement of integrity and commitment to the news. My question has to do with the sense of responsibility that you must feel when we realize, if we believe the polls, that two thirds of the people who get their news get it first on television, and many millions of those people never go any further than that. Your electronic front page is the only news they get. We understand that only about 2% of the people read Time and Newsweek, and other extended journalistic reports. How do you feel about this sense of responsibility, that Walter Cronkite is the only one from whom they get news?

Mr. Cronkite: I think it's an impossible burden to carry. And it's unfortunate that any of us should be asked to carry it. It cannot be done. There is no way in 24 minutes, that I know of. If I did, I would be doing something else. And I think if anybody else could think of it, they'd do it. There's no way in 24 minutes, that I know of, to communicate all that people need to know to properly exercise their franchise in a democracy, which is getting down to the bottom line of the business we're in. Now having said that, I do think that television, however, has played a very important role, and will continue to play a role, with that portion of the population that cannot read or will not read. We have to constantly have in mind that we are reaching that portion of the population and not mislead them when we feel that they're not going to go further for confirmation on what we have to say. We've got to be more careful, in other words, than any other medium because of that responsibility that rests so heavily upon us. I would like to make a pitch here, as I have elsewhere for many years. I think that this is going to have to be an educational process in getting people back to print. It's going to have to be done, I think, starting down maybe in the junior high school level, and then the high school level, and carry it on in college. There ought to be civics courses on how to read the newspaper, how to listen to radio, how to watch television, so that the educated individual will be discerning. They will understand that the newspapers and the radio and the television broadcasters cannot be 100% accurate or 100% complete, that there are gaps and holes in what is to be reported, that every item should be read and every item listened to and watched with some scepticism. Only by teaching scepticism are we going to avoid cynicism, and I think that that's rather critical.

Question: I was somewhat concerned about your comment earlier that you had never felt any constraints with CBS in terms of what you might cover and this kind of thing. This seems to differ considerably from the account you might get after you've read something like Fred Friendly's Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control, or Alexander Kendrick's biography

of Edward R. Murrow. I just wonder, do you think that perhaps because of your exceptionally high credibility with the public that Bill Paley and others at Black Rock have kind of shielded you from some of the internal politics and the controversy?

Mr. Cronkite: Oh yes, without a question of a doubt. Absolutely. Not because of my high integrity but because of my low flash point. But actually, no. I didn't mean to suggest that there were never any discussions in higher echelons or that pressures were not put on a Bill Paley or a Jack Schneider or a Fred Friendly at one point or another. I'm talking about what reaches my desk. I'm quite a way down that ladder from where they are. They're protecting my back, and that works. I'm not saying that there has never been any pressure put on CBS or that there is not some internal pressure at some point in the CBS hierarchy from one level to another. But it stops, that buck stops somewhere before it gets to my desk. It has no influence on our broadcast as far as I know. That's the way it works. I think there's another thing that could be said. I didn't think of this myself. It's been asked by some very bright, anti-establishment students from time to time in conferences like this. And they're right, when they say, "But wait a minute, isn't it possible that they don't need to tell you what to do, you're part of them. And you do it exceedingly well to satisfy them on what they would have on the air anyway, so there's no problem." I think there's some truth to that. I couldn't deny that. It's not so much knowing my place, in the sense that I wouldn't go beyond a point at which they might get nervous. It's not that. But I do think that probably my generation, with my basic outlook on life and so forth, I'm not likely to be offensive to Bill Paley and Frank Stanton and others. I think that is probably an element. On the other hand, maybe I'm terribly offensive to them and they're just afraid of me.

Question: Recently Connie Chung claimed that your colleague, Eric Sevareid, was instrumental in convincing the CBS officials to halt the analysis of the high administration officials in the Nixon Administration. Does this represent any kind of restraint, the fact that CBS was the leader in stopping the analysis of the speeches at a crucial time?

Mr. Cronkite: Eric very definitely did that. He didn't like the idea of instant analysis. He didn't like it long before Agnew raised it, and made it an issue. I think as you will note, as you perhaps have noted, the rule was handed down that there would be no instant analysis, and that lasted for, I think, just two Presidential broadcasts and then we dropped the rule. Mr. Paley recognized that it was a mistake and all the rest of us did, and I think even Eric did. And we went right back to so-called instant analysis, which of course it isn't. That was phoney in the first place. The editorials you read in a morning newspaper, after a night-time news conference, are more instant than the ones you hear on the air right after the President has spoken. Again, it's the shadow rather than the substance. We appear to be doing an instant analysis but we got the briefing and the advanced text at the same time that the morning newspaper editorialist got his, except that he sat down right away and had to get it into print. You don't see it until the next morning so you think that he had the whole night to cogitate on it. And besides, that wasn't the issue anyway. I mean, that wasn't why it was raised. Why it was raised was so that the President would have an unrestrained

propaganda medium at his command and that no one was there to question any of the facts he gave or the opinions he espoused.

Question: Can you discuss any anecdotes or experiences that you have reported, and felt that you have reported very objectively, and then later discovered your own personal biases or subjectivity had colored your reporting?

Mr. Cronkite: (Pause) Obviously they're not outstanding examples. Not memorable ones, anyway. I can't think of anything. I've frequently said things on the air in an ad-lib situation that I later wished I'd bitten my tongue. I can't think any of them really revealed bias or prejudice necessarily. They were just fatuous or my attempt at humor, usually, which is disastrous many times. There probably have been some. They don't live with me. I haven't worried about them that much. I don't think there've been a lot of them.

Question: Mr. Cronkite, about the only time I think I've ever seen you on the air that you seemed to be almost speechless, was a time following the Indiana primary in 1968 when you were interviewing Bobby Kennedy. I remember you asked him a question about whether he felt that he was advantaged because he had a lot of money and could spend a lot of money on television. He responded by saying, "Mr. Cronkite, it's your industry that forces us to do this, and if your industry would give candidates free time to speak, then there would not be this kind of advantage to people with money."

Mr. Cronkite: The Kennedys are very clever at that. They're very good at the fast repartee, putting you back on your heels.

Question: And I wonder if you have given any additional thought to that, or if he caused you to think about that.

Mr. Cronkite: Oh, I think it's absolutely true.

Question: And whether or not you think the time will come when the networks will provide free time for the major Presidential candidates on an equal basis?

Mr. Cronkite: Well, CBS has been trying to every Presidential election year through debates or back-to-back appearances, and it's this darn equal time rule that knocks it out. We simply do not feel that we have the air time, we cannot afford, we cannot ask the local stations to give up the time, some of whom are not quite as rich as the network, some of whom even are almost marginal operations. But you can't ask them to give up time for a multiplicity of minor parties. There's gotta be some way to work that out, that the major party candidates can be given air time and the minor parties can be given an opportunity of access but not perhaps with the same amount of time. Something that has to be done. And I absolutely think that there should be free time. I agree with that 100%. I was just taken aback because that's not the way I'd expected that answer to come out.

Question: Mr. Cronkite, in a series of articles in the New Yorker Jonathan Shell has strongly suggested that not only was it the purpose of the Nixon Administration to provide a free propaganda forum, but so far as possible to discredit television and all of the media. Now you've made certain allusions to that. Do you want to expand on that a bit?

Mr. Cronkite: Well yes, I've said in the very beginning, not too long after Agnew's Des Moines speech, November '69, in a hearing before the Irwin committee on freedom of the press I used the word conspiracy. I said there was a conspiracy in the Nixon Administration to try to discredit the press -- using the generic term including broadcasting -- the press in the nation to try to bring down its credibility in order to raise the credibility of the Nixon Administration. Like the old U tube and Dr. Bone's physics class, you know, if you put the pressure on one side it's going to raise on the other. I believe that to this day. As a matter of fact it has now been proved though at the time I was much assailed by even some of my colleagues, and I don't mind naming them today because I was so offended that they couldn't see the picture. David Brinkley went before the same committee and was asked the question, he said, "Ridiculous, every administration criticized the press." And Howard Smith rose immediately to the defense of Nixon and Agnew. I thought they were way out of line and I thought I was right and now we know that I was right. We've got the documents. That was what they were trying to do, that was their objective. And they've succeeded. Don't think they lost that battle. The reason -- I'm convinced of this -- the reason Richard Nixon was re-elected President in the face of Watergate in November 1972 was because their campaign succeeded in the three preceding years to the point that the press through much of the United States believed that the leftist, Eastern, effete, Establishment newsmen were making up the Watergate story somehow or other, were playing up a story which was just another little scandal in Washington, and could not see beyond the end of their nose, or if they did see, were fearful that they were falling into that trap that Agnew and Nixon had promised them they were going to fall into unless they represented not journalism but what they believed to be the interests of their middle American constituency. That is why, in the face of all the revelations of Watergate, right on up to November, the United States went right back and voted Nixon in with such an overwhelming majority. Now I'm not saying that McGovern could have defeated him, even if the situation had been reversed, but I think it would have made a vastly different campaign. Certainly this matter was a contributing factor to the Nixon victory.

Question: You may be saying some things about possible restraints to Presidential acts as to the media, but given the access that they now have, do you think that anyone can defeat a Presidential incumbent?

Mr. Cronkite: Oh yes, I think we're going to prove that in future elections. Yeah, I don't believe that anybody has that kind of command over the medium, that is broadcast medium. As a matter of fact, one reason the President, I think, waited as long as he did to announce that he's a candidate, is because now the medium will look much more carefully at Presidential appearances before putting him on the air now that he's a candidate. That's one of the things we're beholden to do under the FCC. We now are into the equal time situation, although there is not a candidate. They're not candidates for nomination, but still rules begin to apply.

Question: Networks have never denied a Presidential request for air time, I believe. Do you agree with that in.....

Mr. Cronkite: That's not true, not quite true. We denied a couple of them to President Ford, Kansas City....

Comment: In that instance he announced that he would make time available if the networks denied it. He came back and requested it, and upon that request was granted time.

Mr. Cronkite: Right, but that did not happen then a couple of weeks later in Phoenix, right?

Comment: I don't know if he requested it.

Mr. Cronkite: Well, I'm not sure either.

Question: Overall, you know, very few times that they've been denied and do you agree with that policy?

Mr. Cronkite: Do you mean do I agree that we should turn him down or that we should....

Question: Do you forsee any circumstances under which a President should be denied air time?

Mr. Cronkite: Yes. Very definitely. I think that if the White House cannot give you an advance text and show that it's a matter of national importance, I don't see why we should have to believe that it is, simply because he says it is. Absolutely no.

Question: Why do you think the networks have been reluctant to do this?

Mr. Cronkite: Well, I think that the reason has been that we have believed most times that it is of national interest. When it hasn't been we've done this thing like Kansas City and Phoenix and I think that there'll be more of that in the future as President Ford makes more use of television, or tries to. This first year of President Ford's incumbency has been a very interesting year in which I think the appearances he was making were of interest, of value, in getting to know a President who didn't even stand for election. I think that's rather important that we hear him on the issues and hear what he's like and where he stands. So I don't see any real argument on the Ford situation up to now. It's a very touchy issue, obviously it is. But if the broadcaster cannot get a sense from the press office, from the President himself, from the President's aides as to the import of the speech he's going to make, then I think it ought to be very reluctant to put on a sight unseen speech just because the President says it's of national importance.

Question: Mr. Cronkite, over the course of the Vietnam War, many of us watched, and I think were very much influenced by your reportage on the war. I would personally be very interested in knowing whether or not you, during the course of the war, changed your mind in any profound way about it and whether or not you believe that change, if in fact it took place, in any way influenced your editing or your reportage of the war.

Mr. Cronkite: Answering the last question first, I hope it didn't influence my editing and reporting. I certainly tried to avoid that, but I wouldn't guarantee that it didn't, as I can't guarantee any of these things from having crept in. Certainly they weren't done deliberately. In the first part of your question, oh yes, I came around 180° on the Vietnam War. I had believed in the early days of George Kennan's containment theory that it was necessary to contain Communism where it was, and to prevent inroads of Communism elsewhere. I was beginning to doubt that that policy was an effective one as early as the 1960's. But still in Vietnam I thought that by putting military advisors into Vietnam we were doing the proper thing -- that we were giving a nation which was not a democracy, but which had a chance to develop into one, an opportunity to do that by trying to help them strengthen their resistance to internal subversion and external invasion. I became disenchanted with that when the military advisor program became, instead, a full-fledged American war, and the sending of troops to the point where we took over the war and were not just assisting the Vietnamese but were running a war for them. And particularly I was disenchanted because I felt that the Administration was not leveling with the American people, and not letting it in on the great decisions of putting our people into war, and, as a matter of fact, was deliberatly misleading people as to the numbers of troops that were going to be committed and the nature of the commitment. I got that feeling on a trip in '65 when I -- I forget the figures now, the precise figure, but I think at that time the ceiling was 69,000, alleged ceiling, that we were being told was the ceiling -- and I got out there and saw Cam Ranh Bay being built and Generals in the field were talking about 200,000 men, some of them talking 300,000 already. And I found out that the pipeline already was filling up with those men. And yet the American people were being told 69,000 was the ceiling. Well, you know, there's something wrong with that war, quite clearly. And that's when I began to turn around and the turn around came rather rapidly in my personal feelings. I hope not in the way I reported the war. Except for going out to the Tet Offensive. At that time, in the great turmoil of the Tet Offensive of '68, there was a preconceived plan in New York of which I was an instigator -- there was a suggestion at any rate -- that because of this trust factor you're talking about somebody probably ought to go out there and come back and say, "Look, this is the way it looks to me," and try to wrap that thing up and make it a personal approach. That's what I did -- the only time I editorialized on the evening news, labeling as such. But those reports were meant to be personal reports, meant to be editorial, and they were strongly on the side that this was a no-win situation, that we had been misled, even now were being told this was going to be a victorious war, and there was no hope, no light at the end of that tunnel, not the way we were going. It couldn't be done with 350,000, or 400,000, or a half a million or a million men. And it was a rather decisive moment as far as I was concerned.

Dr. Davis: One final question.

Comment: This isn't a question, it's a request. Would you please say, "And that's the way it is?"

Mr. Cronkite: Well, if you think it is.....

Dr. Davis: Dr. Herman Cohen (President of the Speech Communication Association), I'd like you to make a presentation at this point.

Dr. Cohen: Mr. Cronkite, the Speech Communication Association is immensely grateful for your coming here and spending this time with us and being so open and candid. As a small token of our gratitude to you I'd like to present this certificate to you. Let me read it to the members of the SCA here assembled. "The Speech Communication Association, in recognition of his contribution to discussion of public affairs, and to excellence in broadcast communication, honors Walter Cronkite." Thank you very much.

Mr. Cronkite: Thank you. I'll come back again with that kind of reception. Thank you. You've been a wonderful audience and it's been great fun to meet with you here in these beautiful surroundings tonight in magnificent Texas. I hope that we all do have a chance to get together again. I'd like to suggest that Austin be the host every year and we can all come back here to this wonderful spot. And that's the way it is. Good night.